

Groups demand answers about Harvey's impact on San Jacinto River Waste Pits site

By [Lise Olsen](#) Updated 4:16 pm, Tuesday, September 5, 2017

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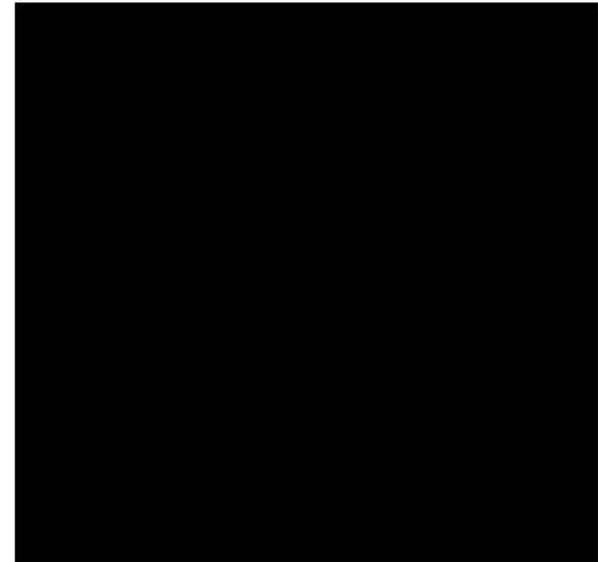
Photo: Courtesy Harris County

IMAGE 1 OF 3

Local residents monitor these three barriers called "dolphins" near the Interstate 10 E. bridge on the [San Jacinto River](#) to try to get an idea of what kind of damage might be happening to a cap that contains

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Citizens and leaders of nonprofits gathered on the river's edge on Tuesday to urge the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency



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to provide additional information on whether dioxin is escaping from the San Jacinto River Waste Pits in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

Scott Jones, of the Galveston Bay Foundation, said he does not trust recent assurances from EPA and state officials and from one of the companies overseeing the Superfund site's cleanup that the site's cap appears intact.

He said dioxin has already leached from the site in older flood events, creating hot spots in sediments in the river and in the Galveston Bay that the state has failed to adequately monitor because of inadequate resources.

EPA and leaders from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality both have said the cap appears to remain in tact based on preliminary inspections of the waste pits that were carried out by boat and on land. Separate reviews were conducted Friday by a contractor and Monday by federal and state officials. Representatives of both the EPA and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality both promised to inspect the cap more thoroughly when river conditions allow.

The EPA has said the waste pits were one of 13 Superfund sites in Texas that flooded during Hurricane Harvey and could be damaged. About half of those sites so far have been visited by inspectors who performed preliminary checks for damage, according to the TCEQ and the EPA. Both agencies promised they will also do related air quality and water quality monitoring and share their results with state and local officials.

Several homes in the Channelview riverbottom nearest to the pits were blown off their foundations when the river rose over its banks. Four houses floated away and several others sunk into enormous sinkholes that formed in the floods.

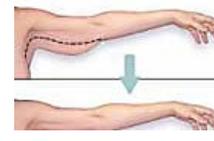
Channelview resident Jennifer Harpster said tainted water rapidly flooded her entire neighborhood, which she and her neighbors were continuing to clean up on Tuesday.

"When you go down there, it looks like a bomb went off." she said. "The smell of chemicals is inside my house."

Harpster is the lead plaintiff in a civil lawsuit in which 600 people claim their lives and livelihood already have been damaged by the waste pits. She believes dioxins have already affected her family's health - her granddaughter died of a rare form of cancer at age 6.



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Activist Jackie Young, who grew up in nearby Highlands and is the founder of the grassroots Texas Health and Environment Alliance, said the members of her grassroots group needs hard "data and mapping to tell us nothing has escaped from these pits and everything remains intact."

Young said she also doesn't believe assurances from companies managing the waste pits that they can handle any damage to coverings atop the cap through routine maintenance. She wants to see the pits removed from the river entirely.

"Harvey was not a routine event. Let's stop kicking this can to future generations," Young said. "We need the waste pits removed in a controlled, engineered environment, not in a hurricane."

Pam Bonta of another non-profit called Texas Quality Water said she's worried about 6,000 households that depend on well water and are located in the flood plain around the pits in the communities of Channelview, Highlands and on the Lynchburg peninsula -- all in Harris County.

TCEQ and county officials too say they're concerned about those who depend on individual or municipal well water that lies in the flood plains of the Waste Pits and other Superfund sites.

"TCEQ and EPA toxicologists and technical experts are on the ground and in the air collecting real-time air monitoring and water quality data," the EPA Monday. "That information is being analyzed by experts now and will be provided to the public as soon as it is available. We encourage the community to continue to follow the expert safety advice of local officials."

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